

Understanding Traumatic Experiences of Homeless People and Treating Them Using Narrative Therapy

PhD Thesis in Social Work by FEHÉR, Boróka

In my thesis I set out to explore the possibility of understanding homelessness, and especially rough sleeping, as a traumatic experience in itself – and find ways in which this and other traumatic experiences could be dealt with efficiently. I suppose that “chronic” (long-term) rough sleepers could get in this life situation, and surely stay on the streets because of the lack of treatment of various traumatic experiences they had encountered before, during or after becoming homeless. In my thesis I wish to provide theoretical and practical guidelines for social workers working with homeless people.

In the first chapter I introduce some national and international definitions and paradigms about homeless people, especially rough sleepers. I briefly summarize the findings of various research carried out among rough sleepers in Hungary. Being part of one of the research teams myself, I explain my quest to gain a deeper understanding especially into the personal experiences of homeless people themselves. I would like to know how people get into a situation of rough sleeping and why they cannot make their way out. I suppose that these are not questions that can be answered through multiple-choice questionnaires, thus the need for a more qualitative type of research.

In the second chapter, I look at psychological trauma and its development in the field of psychology – how it started from hysteria, problems in the battlefield and arrived to be officially recognized by the DSM as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). I look at the stories and symptoms of “hysteric” people or “burnt-out veterans” and I show how we can observe very similar behaviour among street people. I also draw on evidence that in many cases homelessness is not just an issue of lack of housing (although in many cases it is!) – those who are re-housed often cannot keep their housing for long. Could it be because of their unresolved trauma?

In the third chapter, I introduce the background of my research – postmodernism and the narrative approach. In my thesis I analyze three interviews with (former) rough sleepers, using the Biographical Narrative Interview Method – I explain my choice for this method and how such an interview and analysis can be used by social work practice. I also introduce my two hypotheses:

1. *Becoming homeless, having to sleep on the street/in a shelter can be traumatic for the person.*
2. *Homeless people have other untreated traumatic experiences in their lives, which could have happened before or after becoming homeless.*

In the first part of the interview, I look for possible traumatic experiences, and then during the second part I try to see if the way people talk about these events shows sign of untreated trauma or not. In all three interviews I found that becoming homeless proved to be a traumatic experience indeed, and in all three cases I could see other untreated traumas as well.

In the final chapter I provide guidelines as how to help people resolve traumatic experiences from their past, and try to see how the examples provided could be used with homeless people. During my research I discovered narrative therapy, which offered a direct connection with Chapter 3. As I could not find anything about narrative therapy is Hungarian, I decided to introduce this form of practice in detail, and explore how it could be used to help homeless people deal with traumatic experiences of their past, and create alternative positive stories for their future.